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AUTHOR Meyer, Margaret Dietz
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ABSTRACT

College professors in the various disciplines can improve their students' reading ability by instructing them to use reading to learn the discipline. First, professors can examine the goals of their syllabi (academic, utilitarian, romantic, developmental or emancipatory) in relation to reading, since most courses are predicated upon reading. These goals subsume objectives and criteria by which students use reading to learn, e.g., problem-solving, real-world situations, discovery, clarification, or participation. Second, professors need to emphasize that reading to learn is a process from which students are expected to present products for evaluation. It is essential to teach process and content simultaneously and to do so in relation to the goals and objectives of the course. An effective method is to show the students how the teacher is a learner while still being the teacher. Third, professors need to teach students the discipline-specific vocabulary they need to know to learn from the assigned reading, by building a schemata that improves reading comprehension. Finally, the professor's performance in the classroom counts. By sharing enthusiastically the serious reading (and writing, researching, creating, and producing) they do in their disciplines, professors can better involve their students in the subject matter. (Thirteen references are attached.) (KEH)

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Who, Me? Teach Reading?

A Response to Colleagues in the Disciplines

Dr. Margaret Dietz Meyer

Assistant Professor of

Reading and Writing

126 Gannett

Ithaca College

Ithaca, NY 14850

New York College Learning Skills Association

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Abstract

Undergraduates need to be taught how to use reading to learn in the disciplines. Public interest in the issue is evident in the plethora of responses to Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind and E. D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy. Included in this paper are a theoretical rationale for teaching reading at the college level, specific descriptions of how this can be reflected in a course syllabus, and an example which shows how the methodology can work in an undergraduate classroom.

What Do You Mean -- Teach Reading at the College Level?

The question is so important, and public interest in it so great, that Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind and E. D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy are best-sellers of 1987. Both books are about teaching reading and everything that depends upon it, from critical thinking, to writing, to the molding of America's future leaders. Thus, comparison of the two works is inevitable, and so is criticism. More significant, however, is the fact that each addresses the real, daily world of what we do teaching undergraduates.

First, some comparisons. While Bloom discusses the educations of undergraduates through the disciplines of the Arts and Humanities, notably Philosophy, Hirsch bases his argument about the education of children and high school students in the Social Sciences, particularly the history and psychology of reading education. If we accept the premise that effective teaching, particularly effective teaching of reading, is both an individual art and a collective social science, then we are richer because of the attention these books are receiving. What is worth knowing about the human condition, and identifiable, replicable methods of leading of reading, is both an individual art and a collective social science, then we are richer because of the attention these books are receiving. What is worth knowing about the human condition, and identifiable, replicable methods of leading students

to such understanding, are the hybrid wealth to be earned from comparison. It follows, then, that as we examine the foundation of our Mission, "Education Professionals in the Liberal Arts Tradition," and define Ithaca College's common intellectual experience for each other and for our students, we should note what the critics of American Mind and Cultural Literacy are saying.

A host of reviewers, from Ezra Bowen and Stefan Kanfer of Time Magazine, to George Will of The Washington Post to name only three, have analyzed both books and the climate which has made them such commercially astounding successes. Generally, such reviewers are saying four things. First of all, political candidates, as well as academicians, should heed both books, if not read them. Second, Bloom is generally praised, with the exceptions of his discussions of McCarthyism, Blacks, and Feminists, and his implicit exclusion of natural scientists from participation in teaching students about the human condition. Third, Hirsch's review of the history and psychology of reading education is deservedly acknowledged as sound and thorough; it is his failure to connect social science research with the practice of the art of teaching which leaves his 64-page Appendix, "What Literate Americans Should Know," open to criticism. Fourth, most reviewers are saying, "It's About Time" educators addressed the public at this level. What does "It's About Time" have to do with what we do every day? I think, "A Great Deal."

"It's About Time" has been used by reviewers as a concluding counter-argument in pieces which describe both Bloom's and Hirsch's tones as "dour" and "cranky." Although it is difficult to pinpoint the demographics of these books' purchasers, I'm not afraid to

speculate that they are well-read, if not college educated, adults who are concerned about the quality of education American youth and young adults are receiving. And that's the point. The American public to which the reviewers are referring is not necessarily the same population as the "public" in our classes. Our students come from somewhere, and in most cases that "somewhere" is high school. Hence the significance of the comparison.

For almost two decades, Harold Herber, author of Teaching Reading in Content Areas, has explained to our colleagues in the disciplines at the high school level what it means to teach reading to adolescents and young adults: WE ARE NOT IN THE BUSINESS OF TEACHING OUR STUDENTS HOW TO READ; INSTEAD, WE ARE IN THE BUSINESS OF TEACHING THEM HOW TO USE READING TO LEARN. I agree. Those who choose to read American Mind and Cultural Literacy carefully may come to the conclusion that Bloom and Hirsch agree also.

So, what's an already over-worked, conscientious professor in the disciplines to do, especially one who wants to say, "This isn't my area of expertise?"

My first bit of advice is, "Relax. You probably already are Teaching Reading at the College Level, and may not realize it." My second statement is a four-fold answer to the question, "How can I tell if I'm doing it -- **Teaching Reading** -- and doing it **well**? That four-fold answer is comprised of the questions I ask myself long before it is time for my students to render their judgments about the results of my instruction. The questions I ask myself about teaching students to use reading to learn are:

(1) What are the goals of my syllabi?

(2) Do I teach process along with content?

(3) Have I included direct teaching of vocabulary?

(4) Am I prepared as a performer to share enthusiasm about both the work and the fun involved in skilled reading?

So first, examine the **goals** of your syllabi in relation to reading. Are they **academic, utilitarian, romantic, developmental, or emancipatory**? This matters because the objectives we subsume under our goals, and hence the criteria by which we grade our students' performance, define how we want them to use reading to learn. A noteworthy discussion of this issue is found in Peter Mosenthal's column, "Research Views," in the March 1987 issue of The Reading Teacher.

Briefly, if your goals are academic, you are a gatekeeper of cultural and moral norms, and you want students to give you expected, correct answers. If your goals are utilitarian, you want students to be effective participants in a democratic society, using reading in as many practical, real-world situations as possible, as they follow democracy's rules. Romanticists let students determine their own goals for reading, included among which are self-understanding and a sense of self-worth; in this case, the professor wants students to use reading to enhance their psychosocial development, especially in the realm of values clarification. Professors who set cognitive developmental goals include aspects of academic, utilitarian, and romantic goals, and recognize that both the reader and society are dynamic, ever changing. Students are taught to use reading to solve problems appropriate to their level of intellectual development, so that

their problem solving abilities may transfer to a variety of tasks and materials. Those who espouse emancipatory goals, which are similar to developmental goals, assume that most education as currently practiced promotes class distinctions. Thus, such professors want students to use reading to discern sociopolitical biases and persuade gatekeepers that views other than those of the majority may be legitimate.

Granted, it is obvious that the goals and objectives one sets depend upon what one is teaching, but most college courses are predicated upon reading. Moreover, reading to learn is a process from which we expect students to present products we can grade. So, a caveat is in order.

Especially for undergraduates in the first and second year, assigning reading without explaining how students should attack them is just as unlikely to yield learning as explaining the process of what you want them to do without relating that process to the content of the product you expect them to prepare. In other words, one has to **teach process and content simultaneously** in order to get students to use reading to learn, and do so in relation to the goals and objectives of the course. How is it possible to accomplish this?

One thing I do is begin a class by saying, "When I did it (the assignment for the day), I found that...." This grasps students' attention immediately, sometimes to a chorus of gasps, and is an effortless way to focus their thinking on both process and content at once. I share a brief verbal overview of what I thought of the reading while students have the material in front of them, i.e.,

"This looked important, this was rather difficult, this part didn't seem too important, and -- if I've guessed that a specific section will be dry or uninteresting to most students -- tell them how I made it interesting, memorable, or amusing to me as a person. In the last instance, a short anecdote or joke is appropriate; few students like a professor who's never ever any fun at all. On the other hand, students appreciate us because we know what we're talking about and we can discuss it seriously. The facet of teaching described here is an individual art. I think the way I practice it works for me because it show students "the teacher as learner, while the teacher is still the teacher." It also helps dispel two myths. One is that teachers were never students who had to **work hard** at learning what they know, and the other is that learning ends when schooling is over.

Furthermore, as professors we know that sometimes students won't find the readings we assign merely dry or uninteresting, but more important, they'll find them difficult. While tackling challenging assignments is certainly an appropriate part of the college level learning process, we also know that if an assignment is too overwhelmingly difficult, a student may simply give up. To obviate this, we have to look at what makes reading difficult.

Aside from the problem that some students are not thoroughly familiar with how to use reading to learn, students find reading difficult for two reasons: lack of prior experience in the discipline, and lack of vocabulary knowledge. We hold our positions to guide students to learn through our disciplines, so if we do not teach them the discipline-specific vocabulary they need

to know to learn from the readings we assign them, our students can say we're not teaching! In fact, Peter Johnston's internationally award-winning research on the effects of prior knowledge in relation to reading comprehension in the content areas (disciplines) shows that as early as eighth grade, students' knowledge of discipline-specific vocabulary accounts for nine per cent of the variance in their reading comprehension, and general vocabulary knowledge accounts for an additional four per cent. Therefore, especially in first and second year "weed out" courses, where both students and professors are deciding who will major in what, the importance of teaching and learning discipline-specific vocabulary cannot be underestimated.

Here again, the method(s) one uses and the words one chooses to teach depend upon the course and the goals set forth in the syllabus; both also depend upon what the students already know.

As Edgar Dale and his co-authors point our in the preface of Techniques of Teaching Vocabulary (unfortunately, this fine methods text recently went out of print), "Vocabulary development is concept development." Concepts students already know, i.e., schemata, have long been considered the building blocks or reading comprehension by researchers in the disciplines such as Richard C Anderson of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Center for the Study of Reading).

In fact, my own research, which draws heavily upon Anderson's work, shows that **third and fourth year college honor students** in three disciplines (English, Politics, and Psychology) have little if any difficulty judging what vocabulary or terminology is

important to reading in their majors, while other students in the same majors are only 37 to 74 per cent as well-versed. Anderson has called schemata "scaffolding" for the information we expect students to acquire as they read their texts. Yes, it is possible to use vocabulary students already know to teach them more, as our colleagues who teach foreign languages know very well, and it can be done without an inordinate expenditure of time and effort on the professor's part. It can even be fun!

For example, when I introduce first year students to Cicero's On Friendship, I simply write this statement on the board: "When I think of friendship, this is what it means to me." I ask students to think for a few minutes (about three), and write down every word they can in response. Then, in turn, we pool the responses to make a shared Class List, which I write on an overhead. One at a time, each person adds one word at a time, without duplicating a word already listed, until all relevant words are included. Of course student's natural desire to contribute causes some competition, "I had that one too," or "That's my word," but the competition is friendly rather than ferocious. A way to avoid competition altogether and turn this procedure into a collaborative effort is to poll the whole class as each person takes a turn. Simply ask, "Who else had this word?", and write the numerical total on the overhead next to the word. This whole exercise takes about eight minutes. The assignment for the next class is to read to discover "What Friendship Means to Cicero." The added activity is to "Circle every single word from our Class List that you can find in the reading."

Before students return for the next class, I brace myself for the groans: "I can't believe how long it took me to do this," or "What do you mean? It took me two and a half hours," or "When I did it...." The less sophisticated readers think that here is one, absolutely correct answer to the circling activity, but their classmates who are using reading to learn have discovered otherwise. We do compare sum totals from the circling activity, and find that there is "surprising" variation. Then I let the more sophisticated readers explain that they found many synonyms for the words on our Class List. The most sophisticated have already begun to group antonyms separately because they realize this will help them understand the elegance of Cicero's argument. By this point, we have a second, new, whole-class schema derived from using reading to learn, and I can proceed teaching toward the next step in the assignment. Yes, vocabulary development IS concept development.

Finally, our performance in the classroom counts. As a colleague of mine from the natural sciences once remarked, "When you come right down to it, what we really are is professional talkers." I think he was, and is, right. More important, we have to be readers to do what we do, and it seems to me that the most important way to lead students to understand this is to share our enthusiasm about what we read ourselves, and why. And why <u>do</u> literate adults read? For information, and for pleasure.

Yes, pleasure! To be sure, our more important task is to share enthusiastically the serious reading (and writing, researching, creating, and producing) we do in our disciplines, but

I also mention what I read for fun, just plain fun.

On vacation, after John Boswell's The Awful Truth About Publishing, and between the Countess of Romanone's The Spy Wore Red and Louis L'Amour's Last of the Breed, I was riding a ferry across Long Island Sound, and witnessed this conversation. An attractive, poised teenager, who appeared to be about 14, was earnestly trying to hold a polite adult conversation with two of her parents' friends, who had asked, "How's school?"

She replied, "My social adaptation skills are at the 85th percentile, and my critical interpretation skills are at the 83rd percentile." She did not mention any subject she was taking, and among her various possession spread along a bench we shared, I saw not one shred of reading matter -- not a book, nor a magazine, nor a newspaper.

Merely an observer, I kept my thoughts to myself. "That girl could be in my class in a few short years...but she really **wants** to grow up and be able to communicate with adults. Overall, she's another one who forgot about or lost the fun of reading for pleasure when she outgrew children's literature. Instead, she watches TV and movies for entertainment. It's so much easier to push a button and watch pictures of ideas than it is to turn a page and visualize images in your own mind...."

To be fair, some young adults have spent so much time watching films, that they are highly cinema-literate. So, they are not completely empty-headed, as Ezra Bowen discusses, but the schemata they possess for learning differ from those of other people, particularly their professors, their parents, and other literate

adults who acquired the life-long reading habit at an early age.

In sum, this is the issue that both Bloom and Hirsch address. That they approach it from different vantage points, the heritage of reasoning in the Humanities versus the history of research in the Social Sciences, doesn't bother me one whit. The **literacy problem** they address, not that of learning how to read, but of **knowing how to use reading to learn**, has been public knowledge for some time. Let the critics of both books keep reading, and writing. Perhaps some of us are among them. Continued public attention focused on reasoned, literate solution can only help. It's About Time, and It Matters a Great Deal.

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